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'The Kremlin Letter'

HOW FINE to be John Huston, the legendary John Huston, with estates in Ireland, blooded horses, making sweet movie deals, calling the shots, knocking out sleazy schmattas like "The Kremlin Letter" which opened Sunday at the New Penthouse and Loew's Tower East.

Huston sees the spy game as a business proposition and an exercise in depravity, and has made the film as a trip for lovers of the perverse. Within the convolutions of the maddeningly convoluted plot (impossible to follow, actually), Huston has packaged many of the currently fashionable film perversities, making the movie as sort of Frederick's of Hollywood catalog of what is currently marketable in the kinky field.

So that when Patrick O'Neal, as a secret agent, is abruptly thrust into a world of private espionage organizations, of drag queens, voyeur - sadists, masochistic prostitutes, all with elaborately bizarre code names, it is though we have been flung into some grim, humorless version of the James Bond films (Huston directed "Casino Royale"), but without the fun and games and wonderfully exuberant madness.

The movie takes itself very, very seriously, making rituals out of little bits of spy business. Huston gives it all little twists and quirks, so as to offer the appearance of freshness. The gang's leader (Richard Boone) speaks with a thick folksy Midwest accent that is caricatured to make it heavily menacing. George Sanders, one of the screen's legendary great lovers, is a piano-playing drag queen whose hobby is knitting. Nigel Green as a satyr-pothead called "Whore," because he likes them in bushes. But it's not fresh; it's tired. Up

there on the screen it looks as the whole spy genre is gasping its last as it strains for perverse effect. Huston has shown signs of this before; in "The List of Adrian Messenger," in the campy tone of "Beat the Devil," in the famous scene in "Asphalt Jungle" which Luther Adler watches the teenager jitterbug. But in those films Huston did it with restraint; in "The Kremlin Letter," he runs amok.

There is nobody in the film to care about, to root for, to believe in. Only Orson Welles, for once under control and not acting up a storm, plays a role of interest, a high Russian Government official with a taste for art, male lovers and the double-cross.

Watching them all go through the whole foolish business of trying to get back the document of the title, I suspected what Huston was aiming for in an audience were the people who are waiting for the illustrated edition of Kraftt-Ebbing.

— RICHARD COHEN